

There is a point where you become distant from your own sensations in an odd way. It's not that you are unaware of your surroundings, but become super-aware of them. You are no longer isolated from the environment by virtue of being resident in an inner world, but actually keyed into it. It doesn't happen often, at least for me; perhaps the ability to get to that place is crowded out by the trappings of civilisation. I reached that place while walking in South Africa. It was hot. It was more than hot. It was 54°C, there was no shade and that ephemeral light breeze that had occasionally wafted across the lagoon was just a memory. My hat was wet with sweat and I was oily with sunscreen.

Someone was talking. From a distance, I heard my voice saying, "I'll go". Yes, I'll go and enter the uncertainty of an unfamiliar environment swarming with hostiles. The reply to my comment was quick. "That would be great, here are the Landrover keys." So that was it. I had to make my way along the narrow spit of land that extruded into the estuary on my own. This would be the first time that I had walked the land without someone else to keep an eye out with me. Apart from the temperature, the lie of the land was deceptive. It could have been somewhere in England with low-lying scrub grassland, placid water and an occasional stunted tree. Quite demure and relaxing, but then there was that heat, like being stuck in an oven that, without the breeze, made the sweat boil out of you. And that placid water, so quiet, gently lapping and inviting was the most deceptive thing of all for this was crocodile country. Never mind the reptiles, it was hippo country too (far more dangerous) and the brackish waters were also home to sharks taking a break from the open sea to seek warmer, hairier, sweatier prey. Two out of three were amphibious (though with all the surprises that African wildlife had visited upon me I wouldn't have blinked if I saw a shark sunbathing on the river bank) and I was on my own, never more than six feet from the water's edge.

It was to study the crocodiles that I had come here and my experiences to date had convinced me that I was tolerated on their terms. They would leave me and my colleagues alone unless we became a threat or the easiest way to fill their bellies. We had a saying among us. "You do not have to be faster than the crocodile, just faster than one of your colleagues." The crocodiles were not malicious, they were just crocodiles. They watched us with those calm eyes that, millions of years ago, watched dinosaurs. They registered our movements, the sequence of our activities. Submerged in water or basking on the far shore they monitored us more carefully than close circuit cameras. That is their way. They watch and monitor and use the information that they have gathered for their purposes later (hunting purposes). They looked on as we unloaded the iron scaffolds, dug deep pits to seat them and excavated the trenches to lure them in with some foetid meat. In this way we constructed a crocodile trap, one that would entice one of these leviathans to a free snack and keep them there till we could reach them, administer a muscle relaxant and take our measurements. It worked well. On our first attempt we caught a large male, a shade under 4m. This may be small when compared to the record books, but overwhelming when those are your hands under its chin and, with six other people, you are straining every muscle to get it out of the water. We were in a hurry because he was not alone. Just a short distance away there was another croc of similar dimensions submerged out of view. The two crocs had been sizing one another up

when we arrived and those enormous jaws had snapped shut with a thunderclap just as we drew near. With the one in the trap sedated and hauled out onto dry land and the other out of sight (but not out of mind) we set about taking our measurements before his friend overcame his inhibitions and cruised in for a closer look.

While holding down the tape measure on his broad back I noticed that he had passengers. Four large, white barnacles were clamped to his dorsal armour. How odd to think of them sitting in the murky water straining algae while their host lay calmly on the river bottom prepared to interrupt their feeding in a fraction of a second when he would catapult out of the water to catch prey of his own. At one point we rolled him onto his back and tried to find a pulse. A four-meter long crocodile has the same size hand as I have. They have five fingers, three of which (the thumb to the middle finger) have claws and the others are delicate, small-scaled, leather glove fingers. They were warm and dry and I felt an overwhelming compassion for this beautiful, ferocious creature who had been duped into a trap and now lay paralysed on the dry lagoon shore while small, hyperactive, bipedal mammals swarmed over him taking measurements and occasionally prodding and poking him. I held onto his hand in a strange interspecies handshake while trying to find any tremor from his beating heart, but it was futile. I may as well have tried to listen to a handbag or plastic toy.

While the others milled around with other tasks, their notebooks filling up with data, I sat with him and poured water that sparkled in the early morning sunshine onto his broad back to cool his scales. I watched him for that time and he watched me whenever his eyes were uncovered. I could not lose the impression of patient intelligence that emanated from this enormous reptile. It was a feeling that I was being watched and memorised, remembered as a member of a species that could exert power of immobility over him. There was also his strength, strength that had been perfectly controlled and regulated, until the panic of entrapment set in.

And now I was walking through his territory without the benefit of a crowd. My smell, my shape, my sounds all well known to him. I looked for him and his kind, but saw nothing. I passed the log that looked like a crocodile (and had stopped several hearts on our past ventures) and the place where he had launched himself into the water like an enormous scaly toboggan and the place where the hippos had come out to graze in the cool evening air. I walked and I watched and I listened. No splashes, no ripples, no polite cough from behind. And there was the Landrover, blending into the environment with its windows open and grass heads heavy laden with seeds gently batting its sides. Just next to the front wheel an elephantine dung beetle rolled a precious ball of dropping to its secret hiding place. Insects buzzed and chirped in this profound moment of tranquillity.

It was only when I was sitting in the car that I thought about how far I had walked, not just in metres, but away from my English comfort with natural history. I had adapted to wildlife that did not know fear, animals that paid careful attention to monitor its potential targets.

At the end of the book of Job (chapter 28-40) there is an intense and wonderful poem where the Lord proclaims His joy in creation to Job. In most translations, the

chapter mentions 'Behemoth' and 'Leviathan', but in the version I grew up with (the New English bible) it is much more direct. God talks about the crocodile. He seems as thrilled with them as I am. God says to Job.

*¹² I will not keep silent about its limbs,
and the extent of its might,
and the grace of its arrangement.*

*¹³ Who can uncover its outer covering?
Who can penetrate to the inside of its armour?*

*¹⁴ Who can open the doors of its mouth?
Its teeth all around are fearsome.*

*¹⁵ Its back has rows of shields,
shut up closely together as with a seal;*

*¹⁶ each one is so close to the next
that no air can come between them.*

*¹⁷ They lock tightly together, one to the next;
they cling together and cannot be separated.*

And later on:

*³³ The likes of it is not on earth,
a creature without fear.*

*³⁴ It looks on every haughty being;
it is king over all that are proud."*

I can relate to that! I had a close encounter with a this very animal. There was a legacy to this day too, an exchange.

Somewhere in Africa, a crocodile carries an impression of me in his memory and somewhere in Britain; a human carries an imprint of a crocodile in his.